A Visit from Everywhere

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That first night, Xiantio slept for hours upon hours.

Katioka guided them across the Hollow, across countless realities and backwater-oxbows, all throughout the night. Unbeknownst to Abraytha, who slumbered soundly in his own quarters, they had even passed a younger version of *Katioka* herself, on its way to the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.

Up early, the Captain woke with a spring in his step, and began at once to cook up a dashing breakfast. It was an Earth classic, his favourite: Full Scottish. Human cuisine had always had a certain *je ne sais quoi*; if you had asked Abraytha, many races might have composed great symphonies and written eternal plays, but only *Homo sapiens* had truly mastered the frying of the sausage. He hoped Xiantio would like it too. As the fried food neared its optimal step, he left the kitchen and went to wake up Xiantio; she emerged with bleary mumbles to meet his cheerful greetings, and he guided her sleepy form to the dining room by the hand, wary of her bumping into furniture.

She seemed a bit on edge, he reflected, sleepiness aside — but all things considered, she was coping well, considering she had just left her home reality for the first time in her life.

It was only polite to indulge her. Hadn't *he* been scared out of his wits, when he'd first left his own reality-pocket, the Gieakraal? His mother had been taking him to see the many empires of the Bellbreaker's Cradle, to show him how much *more* there was out there, besides their little place. He'd stuck to her the entire time, petrified that the alien universe would kill him, certain that only the great Yophese could protect him.

In hindsight, she had probably been intending to show him that these anxieties were unfounded. If so, he mused, then it must have come as a great frustration to Yophese when a mad cult of archon-worshippers had fouled up the lesson plan by ambushing them and doing their level best to destroy the "wretched spawn of the Vampires of Old". The great explorer had, of course, proved quite able to defend her son when it came to that. Abraytha hoped he could do the same for Xiantio when adversity raised its ugly head.

Xiantio sat down in the chair opposite Abraytha and, pushing her bed-head hair out of her face, arranged an array of sausages, beans, and eggs on her plate. Only after getting the composition *just so* did his new companion begin

happily munching away at them. Mimicking her fussy ways to make her feel at ease, Abraytha waited until they had both begun to eat in earnest, and only then attempted to initiate a conversation.

"So, how did you sleep?" he asked.

"Mhrm. Uugh." Xiantio rubbed her eyes, seemed to process the question anew, and then answered. "Pretty well, actually. Better than I've slept in a while." She paused. "But I do miss the cabin in the woods. My cabin, my little place."

Abraytha felt a pang of guilt at her faintly crestfallen look; he'd taken her away from her home, that lovely little cabin in the woods, just next to the Cathedral of Winter. Sure, she'd been the one to ask him, but it was still him who had actually guided her into his Void Ship. Him who had taken her through the Hollow. He wasn't at all sure he could make it back, find that reality. He had *crashed* there, after all.

Focusing back on Xiantio, he saw she was ferociously attacking her meal. Evidently, her admission of melancholy did not weigh as heavily on her as Abraytha was letting it weigh upon him — or so she wanted him to understand. Either way, the polite thing to do was clearly to do his best to put it out of his own mind, at least for now. There would be time enough to discuss it later. All the time in all the worlds.

* * *

"So," Xiantio asked him after a while, through a mouthful of tattie scone — "wh're wi'going today?"

He smiled and looked up at her, opening his mouth to speak.

It was then, quite without warning, that a loud crash, followed by a few smaller ones, erupted from down the corridor. It sounded as if a very large vase had just been knocked over, and then tumbled all the way down from the top shelf, bouncing on row after row before it finally met its fate on the wooden floor. Which was very odd indeed. Abraytha was, of course, mindful of the frequent crashes, turbulences, and assorted shenanigans that an adventuresome life could bring about, but *Katioka* had not moved an inch.

If one of his prize vases had shuffled off its mortal coil, it could only be because someone had knocked it over.

Xiantio understood at once — if not from first principles, then from the look in Abraytha's eyes. The pair froze, and, in silent agreement, rose from their chairs to slowly make their way out into the corridor. This called for investigation.

Xiantio got to the door first, and opened it. Standing awkwardly by a broken vase was a scruffy girl with short-cropped hair. Her youth and the innocent sheepishness of her expression were already atypical for a suspected void-burglar — but there was more. A pair of goggles covered her eyes, and she was wearing an obnoxiously long scarf, not to mention a puffed-out, multicoloured skirt. Xiantio stood frozen in the doorway, quite taken aback by the apparent ridiculousness of this intrusion, and that of the intruder herself.

Having spotted Xiantio, the girl raised a hand in greeting, then jumped straight into conversation. Her flat ignorance of social graces had a nimbleness to it, a casual confidence which would have worked to put them at ease in any other circumstances, but felt simply surreal as things stood.

"Ah! Hello, darlings — is this your place? Only I'm very much not certain of where I am… I was just walking along, shifting through realities — as one does — and — oh! So rude of me, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Jenny Everywhere. Well, I'm *a* Jenny Everywhere. From the 31,466,344,713,163,653rd Universe."

"What's… how could you *possibly* remember such an obscenely long name!?" Xiantio demanded, somehow picking *this* out as the *most* ridiculous aspect of the girl.

"Why, because I'm Jenny Everywhere!" she answered, unperturbed. "A shifter. *The* Shifter, in fact."

"And that means…?"

"It means I just *know* what universe I'm in at any one time! Actually, at any seven times. Long story."

Abraytha appeared behind Xiantio, making her jump when he began to speak. But he was addressing Jenny, not her — and he now looked not just confused, but actually sceptical.

"31,4*66,344,713,163*,653rd Universe, you say? Now, my polycosmanagnorizo, here," he said, holding up a small, boxy thing which looked at least as knobbly and complicated as its apparent designation — "it says you're from the 314,*567,474*,653rd universe. Or at least that we've just passed through that one."

Before Jenny could respond, Xiantio butted in.

"How did *you* remember the ordinal for her universe? I mean, no way you just read that. You were just waving that thing around!" She narrowed her eyes. "Are you a shifter, too?"

"I should think not!" he chuckled primly. "No, I simply have a knack for remembering any universal designation I encounter. Really handy for navigation, but no more than that."

It was Xiantio's turn to quirk an eyebrow. "What do you mean, a knack? And shouldn't *Katioka* handle navigation stuff ? I mean, what's the good of a living ship if it can't steer itself —" She blinked and looked around, addressing the walls. "Er, sorry, don't mean to be rude, I just —"

Abraytha interrupted her, his look sheepish. "Ah, yes, well — it does, you see. From a certain point of view. *Katioka* and I are telepathically bonded. Only subtly, but it's good enough."

Xiantio's eyes widened, but Jenny Everywhere butted in, oblivious to the cat-eared girl's fascination with what Abraytha had just revealed.

"Ah, well, I, uhm, about the numbers," she stuttered with a conspicuous awkwardness which did nothing to lessen her assertive tone, "I was just, you know, popping into that reality. Wanted to have a cuppa with my — with Jeniffa Anywhatplace. That's this reality's version of me, by the way."

"Just *popping in*!?" Abraytha repeated, mindful of the time it had taken *Katioka* to get here.

Xiantio was on the same wavelength, and completed the question.

“You got a transdimensional machine or what-now?”

“A-haha,” Jenny chortled, raising an index finger. “Not quite. Thing is, I, myself, *am* a trans-dimensional… *person*. Er, that’s a *transdimensional* person. Not a trans *dimensional person*. Although some of me are. But not this one! It’s complicated.”

Long before Jenny’s babble stopped, Abraytha’s eyes had widened in disbelief. His lips quivered, unsure what question to start with.

Xiantio decided to be more practical. “How did you get in here?” she demanded. “Onboard our ship?”

“I — yes! That’s what I’d quite like to know myself!” Abraytha nodded vigorously, then patted the wooden wall. “And I’m sure she would too.”

Jenny bit her lip like a guilty child.

“I… I didn’t mean to intrude,” she explained.. “I was just shifting back to my home reality, and suddenly — there I was, seeing that beautiful vase of yours shatter! I’m so sorry about that. But really, I don’t know what happened. This is a Void Ship, right?”

“Not the term I typically use, but yes,” Abraytha confirmed.

“Right,” Jenny nodded. “Well, this has never happened to me before. To this me, I mean. Frankly I don’t understand. Trans-universal vessels are *usually* rigged to not interfere with other beings, aren’t they? Y’know, to save them from all those creatures in the Void. Or Voids. Whatever. Standard equipment, I’d have thought.”

“I beg your pardon?!” Abraytha spluttered at the apparent insult, then looked pointedly away from Jenny as he addressed his ship. “Don’t worry, the mean lady’s just leaving!” Raising his voice, he locked eyes onto the Shifter once more, with a newly hostile glare. “Alright, Jenny, you’ve had your fun, but it’s time to get out and go home.”

"*Abraytha*!" Xiantio chided him. "You can't just leave her out in the middle of the Hollow. A captain has a duty of care! You *have* to at least drop her back in her home reality."

Jenny blinked, and evidently considered reminding the pair that it didn't matter where they let her off — she could just shift back to the 31,466,344,713,163,653rd Universe from there, if it came to that — before deciding against it, having realised that letting this play out would be *much* more fun.

A slight glimmer of annoyance passed over Abraytha's face before he forced a smile, nodding wordlessly at Xiantio.

"Fine. Follow me, you menace," he told Jenny with the bare minimum of politeness. He glanced at the vase-shards as they passed them, crushing a few more underfoot, and sighed. "Xiantio, remind me to clean that up later."

"Will do.

"I really am *so* sorry," Jenny said again. "I just knocked it over as I materialised — I *could* get you an identical one from a nearby universe to where you first got it, if you'll just —"

"Would that entail you coming back onto my ship again?"

"Well, yes —"

"*Then the answer is no.*"

* * *

There were no further arguments, nor indeed conversation of any kind, as the three of them made their way down via the elevator to the room Abraytha used to steer *Katioka.*

Once there, Abraytha got Xiantio to mess with a few of thefobbly-switches — "*Yes*, that's the technical term." — on the extracerebral interface lining the walls. At once, the familiar sound which accompanied *Katioka*'s travels to and from the Hollow started up — a shrill, shrieking noise which Abraytha *insisted* wasn't a flaw in one of the systems, but a necessary

byproduct of the Dead Weatherman sail he'd integrated, after acquiring it in what he had been keen to describe as a 'totally legitimate transaction'.

"All right then, Everywhere! 31,466,344,713,163,653rd Universe it is!"

"Thanks," said Jenny. She blinked, looking around the room. "…Is that it? No steering wheel or…?"

"Nope," said Xiantio, happy that she could answer this much. "Living ship, remember? She can handle herself."

"Ah! Right," Jenny chuckled. "Sounds like we have a lot in common."

"*Do* you?" Abraytha asked wearily — then spotted Jenny's thin fingers patting at one of the fobbly-switches. He batted it away with a symbolic slap. "— *Don't!*"

"Hey, I wasn't going to —"

"Don't," Xiantio repeated sagely, placing a palm over Jenny's hand and gently pushing it away from the switch. She glanced at Abraytha, then back at Jenny, and gave a pacifying smile. "Just don't."

* * *

They all took the long and boring journey back up to the front door of *Katioka*, and Abraytha opened it for Jenny.

"There. Home, safe and sound, duty of care accomplished."

"Right! Er, thank you," Jenny said with an awkward smile.

"Oh, don't thank *me*," said Abraytha, with more vicarious pride than lingering resentment. "Thank the good ship *Katioka*!"

"Fair point!" Jenny granted, and she stopped at the door frame, looking back over her shoulder. "Thanks a bunch, Katie!"

"*Katie?!*" Abraytha repeated as Xiantio stifled a laugh. "You can't call my ship Katie! She —" He blinked and groaned, rubbing at his foreheaded. "Ugh. No. Never mind. I can't believe I'm telling you this, but she likes it."

"Aha!"

Abraytha rolled his eyes and stepped further out onto the alien street, putting his hands on his hips as he looked around.

"So! Do you know this place?"

Jenny pulled up her goggles and took in the sight of the ordinary Earth city, her gaze focusing on the coffee shop on whose doorstep *Katioka* had landed. The ship was, as a result, blocking off traffic from multiple directions, but in Abraytha's experience, they had several long minutes of bafflement before the authorities actually tried to intervene.

"Yeah, I do!" Jenny said, face brightening in recognition. "That shop there belongs to my cousin — Jessica, Jessica Everywhere. She's so cool, you'd love her. I mean, I don't know you, but most people would, she's lovable like that, my cousin Jessy. She ran away from home — she's got powers too, so she crossed the whole infinitude of the Multiverse until she put down roots here, in the…" She slowed down before finishing. "…in the 7th Universe. Hey! This isn't my home reality at all!"

"What? Yes it is," Abraytha said blankly, fishing the polycosmanagnorizo out of his waistcoat pocket again. "Look."

"Darling, I know where I live," Jenny insisted with a bit of the easy swagger with which she'd first greeted them. "And believe me, this ain't it."

"It isn't? But *Katioka* confirmed the biodata trace — well, I suppose your cousin's presence would account for that, but the — the number is definitely —" Abraytha blinked, then his features relaxed as he sighed. "…Ah. I think I know where we've gone wrong. What Multiverse Designation System are we using?"

"Multi-who-what? This is just what I've always called it."

"Oh dear. You… stay here a minute. Grab a coffee maybe."

"Yes sir!" Jenny said with a mock salute, pulling her goggles back over her eyes as she strode into the coffee shop.

Abraytha, for his part, began to slowly trudge back towards the pilot room. Xiantio gave the inviting coffee shop a brief, longing glance, then followed him in.

* * *

"So. What's the hold up?" Xiantio asked.

Abraytha sighed, fingers fussing with the base of his left horn.

"Oh, it's simple, really. The Multiverse is infinite. Everything is real somewhere. Yes?"

Xiantio nodded. "With you so far."

"So, by definition, it contains an infinity of people who got the bright idea to try and number all the other universes it contains. That's the basic nature of things. Or un-nature. So, inevitably, sometimes we run into conflicts. There are powers, forces… that make it unlikely, but sometimes you do run on interdimensional travellers using completely different systems from you."

"Ah, I get it! We didn't have the wrong number, just the wrong directory."

"Just so. I *had* presumed little Jenny here was running on the Hyphklarth Declaration, but clearly not. Who would she… oh! The Council of Frogs, perhaps? Yes, must be!"

"Who — there's a multiversal council…," Xiantio repeated, "that's — made up of Frogs? What?!"

"Mhm, they're one of the better-known classifying entities, I'd say. When we say the Archons — er, the Archons of *Time*'s — universe is the Third, that's their numbering we're using."

"Oh. So they're the third-oldest universe?" Xiantio guessed.

"No, no," Abraytha laughed. "The Omniverse is eternal, you know. No, the Frogs basically just numbered the universes by the order in which a representative of said universe arrived — the Mouse got there first, so Prime Universe — then the Shambler, Second — then the Lightbringer, Third. Might be how the feud got started, really. Jealous. Though why neither of

them went after the Prime — that's another way of saying First, by the way — well, don't ask me *there*. Couldn't say. This is all just myth and gossip, anyway."

Xiantio's head whirled with questions, but before they could ask any more, Abraytha shooed them away, with orders to call Jenny back onboard, while he worked to configure the controls.

* * *

A few minutes later, the good ship *Katioka* landed in the Thirty-One Quadrillion, Four Hundred and Sixty-Six Trillion, Three Hundred and Forty-Four Billion, Seven Hundred and Thirteen Million, One Hundred and Sixty-Three Thousand, Six-Hundred and Fifty-Third Universe, as designated by the Council of Frogs.

They opened the door and found a little, elfin boy hovering curiously by the doors. He looked no older than ten; his hair was long and unkempt, and his clothes did not actually seem to be clothes so much as clumps of incredibly verdant leaves, clinging thickly to his entire body.

"Huh. What kind of bird is this?" the boy asked without preamble.

"It's not a bird," Abraytha said. "It's a ship."

"Oh!" The boy's face brightened. "Are you pirates?"

Abraytha shut the door again, and stared blankly at Jenny and Xiantio.

"…That was Peter Pan," he stated. Not a question; just a blunt fact.

"Who?" asked Xiantio.

"I'll explain later," said Abraytha. "But it *was*. Wasn't it?"

"Yep," Jenny replied, her expression, too, was resolutely blank. "Definitely Peter Pan."

"Right. Er. Peter Pan's not real in your native universe, is it?"

“Well, no, not really,” Jenny said. There was an odd note in her voice as she said that; Abraytha sensed some history there, but knew better than to pry. “This is definitely not it, either way.”

“Right. I see. Okay. That’s alright. Duty of care.”

He sighed very deeply indeed as the three of them shuffled back to the piloting room.

* * *

Back to the extracerebral interfaces. The Reality Archives of the Collective of Supreme Platypodes. ‘Reality-3146634471316353’.

“Supreme Platypuses?? *Seriously*? What, does one of them wear a hat and go around chasing an evil scientist?” Xiantio deplored.

“Well…” Abraytha replied, trailing off suggestively.

“Oh, for goodness sake!”

* * *

“Hang on, how do you know that reference?”

“Lots of planets have cartoons.”

“Fair enough.”

* * *

In Reality-3146634471316353, there was just an old lady doing some knitting in the void.

* * *

“Uhm… The One and Only True Designation System?” suggested Abraytha.

“Now that’s just arrogant,” commented Xiantio.

“Not untrue.”

* * *

TOaOTDS-31466344713163653 was… well, it didn't appear to actually exist; there was just an everlasting void, peculiarly coloured orange.

* * *

Abraytha scratched at the base of one horn, then the next, trying to think of any other designation system, distraught at his inability to track down a simple universe.

It was then that Xiantio sidled up to Jenny.

"…You could shift home at any time, couldn't you?" she whispered.

Jenny blushed. "Well, yeah," she cringed. "I'm sorry, I thought it would just be fun to get flown home in style for a change, but if you want me to tell him…"

"I think it's a bit late for that," Xiantio whispered back, watching as Abraytha angrily leafed through the third multiversal handbook in a row, looking for a numbering system they hadn't tried yet. "Abraytha's nice, but when he puts his mind to something he can be a little… destructively obsessive."

"Mh? What's that?"

Xiantio's heart skipped a beat as she realised Abraytha had overheard the mention of his name and, consequently, looked up from his books and charts.

"I — er —"

There was no resentment in Abraytha's tone, just honest confusion.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening," he explained earnestly. "Did you have a suggestion? Something… *de*… *ive*? I'll hear anything out?"

"Uhm — er — Deus Initiative!" Xiantio shouted out, a little desperately.

"What?" It was Abraytha's turn to be confused.

"The Deus Initiative," Xiantio repeated, opting to home in on her last-minute idea. It made as much sense as anything, she supposed. "I heardof them back on Evestaar. Some group of transdimensional religious fanatics,

or something. Just the kind of folks to have their own, bespoke numbering system — right?"

"…Fair point," came the reply.

Abraytha, making a mental note to follow that up, fiddled with all the fobbly-switches himself this time, and *Katioka* began its journey into the next world.

They landed with remarkable speed, and all journeyed back up to the entrance-way, with Abraytha insisting all the way that this was most likely not the correct world and that they'd need to examine Jenny's timestream to find the correct one.

The door opened, and Jenny left out a squeak of delight.

This *was* her world.

Right in front of a café, too. Not Jessica Everywhere's coffee shop — just some other, local place, not far from her home. It blocked the traffic again, but the people here didn't mind any more than they had in the 7th Universe (Deus Initiative Classification) — in fact, a few had begun getting out their phones and snapping pictures of *Katioka.*

As Jenny thanked and congratulated the pair for getting her here, Abraytha could scarcely contain his excitement at finally reaching their destination. Though the horned man still grumbled playfully about Jenny getting out and *staying* out, she could tell he didn't mean it. And good thing too. She knew how these things worked; the destinies of the Unbound Scavenger and of this Shifter were intertwined, now. Jenny knew their paths would cross again.

"Thank you too, Katie!" she said, waving at the leviathan-like voidcraft. "And you, Xiantio. Thanks a million. You know, I'd kiss you goodbye, maybe flirt a bit —"

Xiantio emitted a noise of near-feline surprise which in no way lessened her cuteness.

"— but," Jenny finished, glancing at a familiar face inside the café, who'd just looked up to see the source of the audible commotion, "I think I'm all covered on that front right now."

The red-haired girl was rushing out of the café, now, with the hurried eagerness of one who has just seen their girlfriend step out of a mysterious Void Ship flanked by a cat-eared girl and a bat-winged demon-thing.

"Jenny? *Jenny*! You're *back*!" she shouted from afar.

Xiantio shared a laugh with Abraytha. "Right, then! We'll leave you to it," they said, as they retreated into *Katioka* alongside the captain.

The girl with the puffed-up skirt turned, arms open to meet her with a grateful hug; behind her, the gargantuan *Katioka* ascended once more into the Hollow, vanishing further with every inch it rose.

"Jenny! Where did you *go*?!" said Jenny's girlfriend as she finally came upon her, closing her arms tightly around the scruffy adventuress.

Jenny leaned into the hug, bending slightly to kiss the shorter girl's forehead.

"Oh, the usual," she said with a smile. "Broke a vase, played a prank… made some friends."